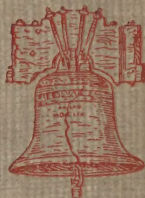


The PROMISE OF THE BELL



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Christmas in Philadelphia

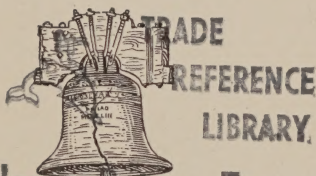
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THE OLD TOWER OF INDEPENDENCE HALL
WHERE RANG THE LIBERTY BELL

THE PROMISE OF THE BELL

Christmas in Philadelphia

WHEN from the wooden steeple of the Philadelphia State House (the Nation's birthplace, and the most sacred spot on American soil) the Liberty Bell rang out its message of freedom "throughout the land," it did more than proclaim the Declaration of Independence, and it did more than summon the colonists to defend that independence with their lives. It promised them in a beautiful and borrowed phrase the reward of their valour. It affirmed their inalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"; thus linking with bare existence two things which give it worth, thus striving to ennoble and embellish the length of years which lie between man's cradle and his grave.

Never was phrase more profoundly English or more profoundly Greek in its rational conception of values. It means a vast deal more than the privilege of casting a ballot, which privilege has been always praised and glorified beyond its deserts. "The liberty to discover and pursue a natural happiness," says Santayana, "the liberty to grow wise, and live in friendship with the gods and with one another, was the liberty

vindicated by the martyrdom of Thermopylæ, and by the victory of Salamis." It is also the liberty which England has always prized and cherished, and which has promoted the thoroughly English qualities of "solidity and sense, independence of judgment, and idiosyncrasy of temperament." To the colonists it opened a fair vista, a widening of their somewhat restricted horizon, a very definite and shining goal, well worth their resolute endeavour.

When on the 23d of October, 1781, three hours before sunrise, a watchman called through the quiet streets of Philadelphia, "Past three o'clock, and Lord Cornwallis is taken," the city awoke to a refreshing sense of safety and exhilaration. The war was not over; but victory was assured, and, with it, life and liberty. There remained the pursuit of happiness, and it was undertaken in good faith, and without undue delay. A sober and sedate community, kept in order by Quaker dominance, Philadelphians had always shown a singular capacity for enjoying themselves when they had the chance. They had danced twelve hours at the *Mischianza*, — a notable achievement. They had promoted horse-racing, condoned bull-baiting, and had been "decently drunk" from time to time at punch parties on the river. Now, deeming pleasure to be one approach to happiness, they opened the old Southwark theatre, which had led a life of sore vicissitudes, rechristened it cautiously the Academy of Polite Science, and gave a performance of Beaumarchais's "*Eugénie*," in honour of Washington, who



(W.A.)

graced the occasion with his presence. He was escorted to his box by attendants bearing wax candles in silver candlesticks, a deferential courtesy which made him distinctly and desirably visible to the audience in the dimly lit theatre.

Nothing in the way of entertainment came amiss to people whose hearts were at ease, and who were unspoiled by wealth or poverty. They went to Washington's rigidly formal receptions. They danced as gaily, if not as long, at the Assembly balls, and at the less august tradesmen's balls, as they had danced at the *Mischianza* and at the *Fête du Dauphin*. They dined well with such hosts as Robert Morris and William Bingham. They opened hospitable doors to strangers, who sometimes thought them dull; "the men grave, the women serious," wrote Brissot de Warville in 1788. They feasted on Christmas Day, and they built bonfires on the Fourth of July. They rode to hounds. They began the long career of parades and processions which have always been dear to the city's heart, and which the famous New Year Mummers have by now carried to the wonder point of gaiety, brilliancy, and burlesque.

Eating and drinking were the fundamentals of enjoyment in the Quaker town, as they have been in all cities and in all ages of the world. But it was eating and drinking relished "as the sane and exhilarating basis of everything else"; and its most precious asset was companionship. When the Chevalier de Luzerne drank twelve cups of tea during the course of a winter

afternoon call upon Mrs. Robert Morris, it was not because he doted on the beverage. No Frenchman has ever shared Dr. Johnson's passion for tea. It was for love of the warm brightly lit rooms (warm rooms were no everyday indulgence in the era of open fires and Franklin stoves), and for love of his agreeable hostess, and of the animated and purposeful conversation. When John Adams "drank Madeira at a great rate" at the house of Chief Justice Chew, "and found no inconvenience in it," it was not because he was a tippler; but because the generous wine quieted his anxious thoughts, and stimulated him to match mind with mind in the sympathetic society of his friends.

Indeed, the drinking of Madeira was in the nature of a ceremonial rite. Even in the days of Penn no serious business was enacted, no compact sealed, no social gathering complete without this glass of wine. It signified good-fellowship and good-will; and when Penn returned to England for the last time, he left his little store of wine in the cellar of the Letitia House "for the use and entertainment of strangers," which was a gracious thing to do.

According to Dr. Weir Mitchell, Philadelphia was famous for its Madeira, which, being a temperamental wine, thrived best in that serene atmosphere, and in the careful hands of Philadelphians. It was kept by preference in demijohns, and lived in moderate darkness under the roof, where it "accumulated virtues like a hermit." For seventy years — the allotted

years of man — it could be trusted to acquire merit. After that period, it began — like man — to deteriorate. When its owner was compelled by circumstance to house it in the cellar, it was suffered to rest and revive for a day or two in a warm room on its way to the dining-table; and the bottles were carried with infinite tenderness lest the wine be bruised in the transit. A crust of bread was placed by every glass to “clean the palate” before drinking. Elizabeth Robins Pennell tells us that, in her grandfather’s old-fashioned household, Madeira was the wine of ceremony, dedicated to the rites of hospitality, sacred to the stranger, to whom it was offered like the bread and salt of the Arab, and with whom it established (if the stranger knew anything about wine) a bond of sympathy and understanding.

When in the winter of 1799 the directors of the Mutual or “Green Tree” Assurance Company were holding their annual dinner, word was brought them of Washington’s death. They charged their glasses, rose to their feet, and gravely drank to his memory. In the century and a quarter which have intervened since then, the rite has been yearly repeated. Even to-day, though the toast may no longer be drunk, the diners rise, the words are spoken, and the dead leader is honoured by the living.

How cordial, how dignified, how intelligent was this hospitality practised by men who were pursuing happiness along tranquil and rational lines! How immaculately free from the grossness of Georgian



drunkenness, and from the grossness of Victorian gluttony! It is true that boned turkey and terrapin were making their way to tables where wild ducks and venison had always been plentiful, and where dairy products, made perfect by practice, were admittedly the finest in the land. But it was companionship and conversation, "the liberty to grow wise and live in friendship with one another," which citizens prized, and which strangers recognized and remembered. Philadelphia, said the poet Moore, was the only American city in which he felt tempted to linger. It was the silver talk, alternating with golden silence, which made the nights speed by when friend met friend, and the wreckage of years was forgotten.

*"And the men that were boys when I was a boy
Shall sit and drink with me."*

The Wistar parties were born naturally into a world where social intercourse was pleasant and esteemed. First a few friends dropped casually in upon Dr. Caspar Wistar, and sat by his fire on winter nights. Then he asked a few more. By 1811 the custom was an established one, and every Saturday night Dr. Wistar entertained his guests, among them any foreigners of distinction who chanced to be visiting Philadelphia. His house at Fourth and Prune Streets was spacious; the supper he provided was simple and sufficient. In 1818 he died, and his friends wisely resolved to perpetuate his name by perpetuating his hospitality. A hundred years is a respectable age for

any social observance to reach in the United States; but Philadelphians reckon such things by centuries. Their tenacity in clinging to old customs, and maintaining them unchanged, is a valiant and poignant protest against the ills done to their town by modernity.

For more than any other American city, Philadelphia has suffered the loss of her comeliness, a comeliness that was very dear to those who first heard the promise of the Bell. "After our cares for the necessities of life are over," said the wise Franklin, "we shall come to think of its embellishments." In the pursuit of a rational happiness, Philadelphians devoted time, thought, and money to the embellishment of their daily lives. They had an unerring taste in architecture and decoration. Their portraits were painted by good artists, Peale and Stuart and Sully. Trim gardens lent brilliancy of colour to their handsome, sober homes. They made of "Faire Mount" hill a thing of beauty, a little spot of classic grace and charm, which artists loved, and politicians ruthlessly destroyed — perhaps because it was the only thing in the nature of an eminence to break the level surface on which Penn laid out his checkerboard town.

To the casual visitor of to-day, Philadelphia seems an ugly and shabby city, set in the fields of Paradise. Surroundings of exceptional loveliness have lured the town-dweller from his narrow streets, from soot and grime and perpetual racket, to pursue happiness in the clean and composed life of the country. And as

more and more citizens seek every year this method of escape, the abandoned city grows more and more downcast and forlorn. It is to be forever regretted that its oldest streets, lined with houses of unsurpassable dignity, should have degenerated into filthy slums, where an alien population violates every tradition of reticence and propriety. Christ Church, Gloria Dei, and Saint Peter's still stand inviolate, keeping their dirty neighbours at arm's length with green churchyards and cherished slips of lawn. Indeed, churchyards, which were once in disfavour, have come to be highly commended. They interpose their undesecrated neatness between many an ancient place of worship and its elbowing associates.

To the visitor who is not casual, to a few careful observers like Mrs. Pennell and Christopher Morley, and to those Philadelphians who love her pavements better than turf, and her brick walls better than trees, Penn's city has a charm which enterprise and immigrant are equally powerless to destroy. It is a beauty faded with years, and dimmed by neglect, and it lies hidden away in quiet nooks and corners; but none the less is it apparent to the eye of the artist and the antiquarian. The Bell, the joyous, old Liberty Bell, is, indeed, housed with appropriate splendour. It has been carried over the country in a series of triumphant processions, and many thousands of Americans have greeted it with reverence. But the deepening fissure in its side now calls imperatively for rest; and Independence Hall — a remarkably agreeable example of



14 THE PROMISE OF THE BELL

colonial architecture — is the Mecca of patriotic pilgrims. All the year round they come to look upon the room where the Declaration of Independence was signed, and upon the Bell which rang its message to the land.

To-day that message rings the knell of the past, and the deathless promise of the future:

"Tho' much is taken, much abides."

Life, though it is beset by greater perils; liberty, though it is restricted by an excess of legislation; and the pursuit of happiness, though it is turned into new, and possibly nobler, channels. The old society "in which men looked up without envy or malice, and even found life richer from the thought that there were degrees of excellency and honour," has been replaced by a society in which perpetual change has bred dissatisfaction and insecurity. But more clearly than before the note of a real Democracy, of a sense of comradeship, of a natural, cheerful, irresponsible interest in one another, has been struck in what was once the City of Brotherly Love. It gives to Christmas something which earlier Christmases never knew; a coming-together of people whose lives are, by force of circumstance, apart, a closing-in of circles which are commonly and necessarily remote.

For a week before the feast, the great pioneer department store of America sets aside a half-hour in the morning and a half-hour at dusk for community singing of Christmas hymns and carols. The rush of

business is suspended, the giant organ peals forth the familiar strains, and men, women, and children, crowded into every inch of available space, sing with all their might, "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," "Come, All Ye Faithful," and "While Shepherds Watch'd Their Flocks by Night." Nobody claims the sounds they make are beautiful; but nobody denies they are inspiring.

*"If unmelodious was the song,
It was a hearty note, and strong."*

People who surge around counters to do their Christmas shopping are indifferent, not to say inimical, to one another; but people who stand shoulder to shoulder singing the same words are impelled by the force of crowd psychology to good feeling and mutual understanding.

Charity is an old, old virtue, and Christmas has always been its sacred season; but it is not charity which now makes the householder put Christmas candles in his windows, to give the passer-by a sense of recognition and intimacy. It is not charity which rears the great municipal Christmas Tree for all the town to see, or provides the great municipal concert on Christmas Eve for all the town to hear — and join in if it pleases. It is not charity which lights the "Community Christmas Trees" on country roads, and leaves them shining softly in the darkness as a reminder of good-will. It is not charity which sends little groups of men and women, accompanied by a sober deaconess

to sing carols in the few quiet streets which Philadelphia has preserved unspoiled. These singers ask for no recompense. They are forging a link in the bond of healthy human emotions. They are adding their share to the little intimacies of the world.

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” “Inalienable rights” the Signers termed them, which yet have never been without assailants. What strange vicissitudes the Bell has witnessed, and what strange meanings have been read into its message! But its promise still holds good. If we never grow wise as the Greeks grew wise, if we never lay hold of the “natural happiness” which is the birthright of Englishmen, we may yet surpass Greece and England in the grace of friendship. It will be something different from friendship with our friends; it will be friendship with our neighbours. It will be — I hope — disunited from duty, and composed of simple, durable materials, — tolerance, good-nature, and a sweet reasonableness of approach. It will read a generous meaning into qualities which are common to all of us, displeasing to most of us, and intelligible only to the wide-eyed few who interpret the heart of humanity.

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